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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000762

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, H/FO
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TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR LE IS IR
SUBJECT: LEBANON: CODEL RAHALL: URGING SINIORA TO STAY ON
AS PRIME MINISTER

Classified By: CDA MICHELE J. SISON FOR REASONS 1.4
(B) AND (D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a May 25 meeting with CODEL Rahall, PM Siniora defended March 14's acceptance of the Doha Agreement. Siniora said the USG can do more to help Lebanon and urged the USG to persuade Israel to relinquish control of Sheba'a Farms. Representatives Ray Lahood and Darrell Issa praised Siniora's performance as prime minister and urged him to stay on in the new government. Siniora responded that while he preferred not to be PM again for another year before the 2009 elections, he would do so if asked and noted that the March 14 bloc must decide on this. End Summary.

¶2. (C) CODEL Rahall, accompanied by Charge and DCM, met with Prime Minister Fouad Siniora in his office on the morning of May 25. Siniora's aides Mohamed Chatah and Roula Nourredine also attended. The CODEL consisted of three members of Congress of Lebanese descent: Nick Rahall (D-WV), Darrell Issa (R-CA) and Ray Lahood (D-IL), as well as Charlie Melancon (D-LA), John Linder (R-GA) and Jack Kingston (R-GA). Later that day, the CODEL attended the Parliamentary session at which Michel Sleiman was elected and sworn in as Lebanon's new president, an action which immediately prompts a process to select a new prime minister and cabinet. Siniora and his cabinet are considered formally resigned, but remain in caretaker status until the new cabinet is agreed.

WHY WE ACCEPTED THE DOHA AGREEMENT

¶3. (C) Siniora began by explaining, perhaps somewhat defensively, why his government and the March 14 coalition had accepted the recent Doha Agreement that ended the recent Lebanese political crisis. Political actors in Lebanon had reached a stalemate and needed to find a way out, he argued. He added that the current post-Doha situation is "extraordinary and temporary," with "temporary" an apparent reference to that fact that new parliamentary elections will be held in spring 2009. He implied that the absence of more robust international community support was a factor in March 14's deciding to agree, as well. "We had lots of letters of support (for March 14 and the GOL) but when we tried to cash them, they bounced" he said.

SOME IN CODEL URGE SINIORA
TO STAY ON AS PRIME MINISTER

¶4. Representatives Lahood and Issa both praised Siniora for his three years of service as prime minister and strongly urged him to stay on in the new government. Siniora was circumspect in response, saying he preferred not to be prime minister again but if he is asked, "I will do it." He noted that the March 14 majority bloc to which he belongs had to discuss this and decide who would be its designee for prime minister. CODEL members saw Siniora later that day at the presidential ceremony and repeated their strong desire to see him stay on.

THE BEST WAY FOR THE U.S. TO HELP?
PROGRESS ON SHEBA'A

¶5. Lebanon suffers, Siniora told the CODEL, because it is a battleground for regional conflicts. The Lebanese government needs help from the international community. The USG can be part of that, but "sending the USS Cole is not the way to help". The best gift the U.S. could give is securing the release of Sheba'a Farms from Israeli control. While Siniora believes Sheba'a should be returned to Lebanon, he advocates that as a first step it be turned over to UN control. The regular messages of support for his government do not help, he said, and are at times a liability. Action on Sheba'a would be a concrete expression of support. He said he had raised this with Secretary Rice several times and urged the Members to carry back that strong message to Washington. Relating this issue to the 2009 elections, he said that the Lebanese people are looking for tangible actions in the

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coming year before elections, not just the commencement of dialogue.

COMMENT

¶6. Siniora was not at all reflective or wistful and did not convey the impression of someone who is in his last days of a difficult three year stint as PM. On the contrary, he pushed the Sheba'a Farms issue with the CODEL as he consistently has in the past with other high level USG visitors. He seemed to emphasize more than on other occasions that the many USG expressions of support for Lebanon and for his government were no longer sufficient without more tangible signs of support such as action on Sheba'a. Siniora and his cabinet are considered automatically resigned but continue in place in a caretaker status until a new cabinet is formed. The March 14 majority should be able to pick the Sunni it wants to be PM, and it will almost certainly be either majority leader Saad Hariri if he wants the job, or Siniora if Hariri does not. End comment.

¶7. (U) CODEL Rahall departed Beirut before this message was sent.

SISON